CHAPTER III

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS
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3.1 Protestant Missions

Christianity was introduced to the Kuki-Chin world firstly by the Protestant Missions. Roman Catholicism was spread among the people with its first footing in Mizoram in 1935. Protestantism has much longer history, and it has wielded much wider control of missionary activities among them. The history of Protestant missionary works among this people has been traced as far back as 1891 when William Williams, a missionary of the Welsh Presbyterian Church of India then serving in the Khasi-Jayntia Hills, visited the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) with the plan of disseminating missionary works over there. The actual missionary works in Lushei Hills were, however, undertaken by the Arthington Mission of the British Missionary Society (BMS) of Great Britain in 1894. A remarkable achievement of this Mission was attestation of Lushei (Duhlian) dialect as the standardized language for all the peoples of Lushai Hills by putting it into written form using the Roman script. Started in 1898 a number of Books of the Holy Bible were translated one after another in this language by various evangelists till publication of the complete Bible in Lushei in 1956. The two missions worked
cheek by jowl with Aizawl as their common mission centre. Initially all the dialectal groups of people thereof adopted the newly attested language.

In 1903, led by the idea of starting the field of missionary operations in the land between the Welsh Presbyterian and the BMS, the latter turned its interest to the southern area of the land and thereby chose Serkawn (near Lunglei) for the seat of its independent missionary work, and soon what later became known as the Baptist Church of Mizoram was founded there with Lushei as its official language as in the case of the Presbyterian Church at Aizawl. At present, there are ten Baptist associations called Area Baptist Councils, organized irrespective of dialectal differences, under this Assembly of the Baptist Church of Mizoram. On the other hand, the Presbyterian Church of India has now four synods, three of which are the Mizo Presbyterian Synod, Manipur Presbyterian Synod and Cachar Hills Tribes Synod. The Mizo Synod comprises 26 constituent presbyteries which all use Lushei as the common official language as well as the common language of worship, whereas in Manipur and Cachar Hills the component presbyteries have been formed along dialectal lines. The Manipur Synod controls four presbyteries, namely Tuithaphai (Lushei dialect), Manipur Gam (Zou dialect), Khuga-Sadar (Vaiphei dialect), and Manipur Eastern (Zou dialect); and the Cachar Hill Tribes Synod runs under it ten presbyteries: Vonzawl and Lakhimpur (Hmar dialect), Sangbar (Biate dialect), Silchar (Lushei), Songbung and Ngalsong (Thadou
dialect), Tlangram (Hrangkhol dialect), Halflong (Lushei, Khasi and others), Jeme and Nreibak (Jeme Naga dialect).

The creeping of local dialects in the ecclesiastical affairs of local churches had its beginning in Maraland of extreme southern Mizoram. R.A Lorrain and his wife launched in 1907 an independent missionary programme under the name of Lakher Pioneer Mission among the Maras whom the Lusheis called Lakhers who settle in the south-eastern corner of present Mizoram, bordering the Chin Hills State of present Myanmar. This mission founded its own church there, named initially the Lakher Independent Evangelical Church of Maraland, and finally changed to the Evangelical Church of Maraland. Probably understanding the separate dialectal identity of the people thereof, the Mission helps to the aspiration of the people in establishing Mara as a local standard language of the church, as well in translation works of the Bible. This amounted to challenge to Lushei dominance, for the first time, in the history of evangelical dealings in the Lushei Hills. This bid of resistance to Lushei imposition was soon followed suit by the Lai dialectal group of people in Chhimtuipui district of South Lushei Hills, a movement resulting in the formation of two new dialectal based denominational groups, namely Isua Krista Kohhran and Lairam Baptist Kohhran with the establishment of the two corresponding churches, namely the Church of Jesus Christ and the Baptist Church of Lailand. All the evangelical and ecclesiastical
translations became carried out through the medium of Lai dialect, thus providing avenues to the expression of the distinctive Lai ethnic identity of the local people. The Church of Jesus Christ of the Isua Krista Kohran denomination was officially inaugurated in 1971. Meanwhile, some of the Lais felt the necessity of retaining the word ‘bapist’ in the nomenclature of the church. Consequently, the Lairam Baptist Church came into being as an independent ecclesiastical denomination in 1982 under its initial name Pawi Baptist Church that later got changed to its present i.e., Lairam Baptist Church.

American Baptism also has been taking part in the Protestant missionary activities among the Kuki-Chins. The American Baptists had already begun missionary works in North-east India in 1836 covering erstwhile NEFA (now Arunachal), Assam, Khasi-Jyantia Hills (now Meghalaya) and Nagaland. Only at the end of the 19th century did they start penetrating the Kuki-Chins under William Pettigrew, a missionary of the Arthington Mission of the Baptist Mission Society (BMS) of Great Britain, who also later joined the American Baptist Mission. Pettigrew was later joined by G.G. Crozier.

In due course the American Baptist Mission (ABM) grew to be the largest Christian denomination in North-east India. Churches were set up in 1950 under a common ecclesiastical forum entitled, ‘Council of Baptist Churches in North-east India’ (CBCNEI). At present, this council has six regional conventions in North-
east India: Assam Baptist Convention, Garo Baptist Convention, Karbi Anglong Baptist Convention, Arunachal Baptist Convention, Nagaland Baptist Convention and Manipur Baptist Convention. In Burma (now Myanmar), there is Zomi Baptist Convention. These Conventions have a number of constituent Associations each. The Manipur Baptist Convention working among the Kukis of Manipur has: Kuki Baptist Convention (from which Kuki Christian Church has been bifurcated; at present KCC with its headquarters at Imphal has two other Synods, one in Nagaland and the other in Assam. KCC is an independent organization not affiliated to any denominational tradition), Thadou Baptist Association, Chongthu Baptist Association, Chin Baptist Association (it has a sister church under the name Zomi Baptist Church established first in 1982 among the Tedim-Zos of Hiangmun village in the Sialkal range of north Mizoram), Komrem Baptist Churches Association. And the Zomi Baptist Convention of Myanmar has reportedly twenty Associations with their head office in Falam. Among the Zous in Manipur there merged another ecclesiastical denomination named Zomi Christian Church (ZCC) with its headquarters at Lamka-Churachandpur of Manipur. It was started by a group of Zou presbyteries who left that denomination in 1967 on ground of non-compliance of the Bible Society of India with their request for translation of the Old Testament in Zou dialect. ZCC got their plan accomplished with the help of the Roman Catholic authorities.
Besides the above three major protestant evangelical Missions and their denominations, many other independent missions have been at work among the Kuki-Chins of North-east India. The first of this kind, named the Indo-Burma Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission, was set up in 1910 in southern Manipur by Watkin Roberts who was originally of Welsh Presbyterian background. This Mission got split in 1930, because of certain internal conflict, into the Indo-Burma Pioneer Mission (IBPM) and the North-East India General Mission (NEIGM) with headquarters both at Churachandpur, Manipur. Again, in 1931 a group of Hmar dialectal identity left the IBPM to institute the Independent Church of India (ICI) with its head office at Sielmat of Churachandpur, which soon expanded its area of activities also in the North Cachar Hills District of Assam, Mizoram and Meghalaya. Further in 1973 a new denomination got branched off from the ICI, under the name of the Evangelical Free Church of India (EFCI) under the leadership of Rochunga Pudaite, who is also president of the Bible for the World Inc. of the USA. Now, the seat of the organization of this church has been shifted from Sielmat to Shillong.

The North-East India General Mission (NEIGM) changes its name to the Evangelical Congregational Church of India (ECCI) whose headquarters are still located at Churachandpur. This church has under it the following constituent ecclesiastical organizations based on dialectal groups: the Evangelical Convention
Church (Paite), Kuki Christian Association-now renamed Evangelical Churches Association (Thadou), Evangelical Organization Church (Vaiphei), Evangelical Assembly Church (Hmar), Evangelical Synod Church (Gangte), Evangelical Church of Manipur (Baite), and United Evangelical Church (Anal).

It may be noted here that emergence in Manipur of presbyteries formed along the diversity of clan/tribal identities of varied dialects has been a post Second World War phenomenon. It is not, however, that there has been no reaction at all to that trend of proliferation of Christian denomination on the basis of dialectal differences. A good number of the Lushei, Zou, Simte, and Tedim Chins of Manipur belonging to the Evangelical Congregational Church of India expressed their strong sense of unhappiness in the trend of evangelical affairs in Manipur by leaving the Church. The Lushei group came back to the Presbyterian Synod in Manipur in 1978, as a parallel of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church.

There had a third synod of this kind among the Cachar Hill tribes that was formed in 1930 with members from the Kuki-Chin, Naga and Karbi communities. In the beginning the gospel was preached there among the Biates. Then the Biates propagated preaching among the Kukis and Zemi Nagas of that area. At present, this synod is divided into ten presbyteries organized, here again, along dialectal lines. They are: Vonzawl (Hmar), Lakhimpur (Hmar), Haflong (Lushei, Khasi and others), Ngalsong (Thadou), Jemi (Jemi Naga) and Nreibak (Zemi). The Tedim
group coming out of ECCI formed the Chin Baptist Association with its affiliation to the Manipur Baptist Convention, and the Simte group organized on their own the Simte Christian Association in 1951 which, however, later in 1957 joined the Baptist Mid-Mission that had been started at Caliper near Pilchard in the 1930s by the formerly American Baptist Missionary G.G. Crozier. Upon joining the Baptist Mid-Mission, the Simte Christian Association assumed its new name, the New Testament Baptist Churches Association (NTBCA), a denomination whose teachings and policy are based on the New Testament.

The New Zealand Baptist Mission Society, too, takes part in some measure in the propagation of the ideas and practices of the protestant theology in Northeast India. First based at Brahman Baria and Chandpur in the present Bangladesh since 1886, this Missionary Society got its footing in Tripura in 1938 with its seat of organization at Arundhutinagar near Agartala. Side by side with it, the Indo-Burma Thadou Kuki Pioneer Mission had its extension unit working in Tripura. The latter Mission got split meanwhile at the headquarters in Manipur, on which occasion the Kuki-Chin Christians of this independent denomination were left uncared for, and they whereupon joined the local (Tripura) New Zealand Baptists. The united body soon formed what has become known as the Tripura Baptist Christian Union. There are yet a few other protestant missionary denominations that have been working among the Kuki-Chins, such as the Salvation Army,
Seventh-Day Adventist, United Pentecostal Church, Reformed Presbyterian Church (North-east India), Church of Christ, Assembly of God, Church of Foursquare Gospel, Christian Revival Church, Revival Church of God, etc.

As the name suggests, the Salvation Army is an evangelical organization having hierarchical structure of ranks of its workers somewhat similar to that of the army. Its structure is: training cadet → commissioned lieutenant (after five years of training) → captain (after fifteen years in service) → major → lieutenant colonel → colonel commissioner → general. After some time of conflicts with the Welsh Mission over the issue of trespass in comity area, only in 1925 was the Salvation Army formally founded first in Mizoram. But, at present its headquarters is at Lamka-Churachandpur of Manipur. Currently it has its core churches in Singhat, Thanlon, Henglep, Imphal and Kangpokpi. Today this mission claims a total membership of 24,824.

The Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), an ecclesiastical denomination based on the observance of the Seventh Day of the week as the Sabbath according to the fourth of the Tenth Commandments that lay down: ‘Six days shall thou labour, but the Seventh Day in the Sabbath of the Lord thy God’. This church proscribes drinking alcohol and eating pork to its members for them to go to heaven upon death. This organization was introduced first in 1941 among the Mizo. Its
extremely orthodox and stringent principles make it not that popular; its membership, consequently, numbers only about 8,000 to-days.

Among the Kuki-Chin the United Pentecostal Church (UPC) took its beginning in Mizoram in 1949 with Kamlova, a former Presbyterian compounder, as its first pastor. In Manipur it was established in 1953 at Revakol village of Churachandpur District. Sangkhum was its first pastor. In 1957 its headquarters was set up by Rev. Lerthansung at Salem Veng of Churachandpur town. Khup Za Go (1996:52) estimates the Kuki-Chin membership of the United Pentecostal Church in North-east India to be 57,628. In Churachandpur District of Manipur alone, members of this church (according to L. Jeyaseelan, 1993:172) amount to 3,500. In this district the member-units are of such diverse dialectal groups as Hmar, Simte, Zou, Thadou, (or Thadou-Kuki), Vaiphei, Lushei, Paite, and Gangte. Obviously, it is not a single dialect-based ecclesiastical organization.

With background of having an All India base, the Reformed Presbyterian Church works in Manipur with its headquarters at Peace lane, Churachandpur town. The church was founded here in 1979. Apart from its evangelical works, this church in Manipur undertakes socio-economic and educational programmes; it runs two schools and one orphanage at Saikot.
The Church of Christ has an international base. In Churachandpur District of Manipur there are around 1,000 members of this church. It was started here in the early sixties of the 20th century by members mostly of Guite of the Paite tribe. Gradually some Vaipheis also have come into its fold. One characteristics of this denomination is that each congregation has no organizational link with another congregation of similar belief.

The Assembly of God may be regarded as a ‘reactionary’ or ‘revivalist’ Christian denomination because it was set up by many a pastor, leader and member of different ecclesiastical denominations who broke away from affiliations to their respective earlier organizations, and were consequently, expelled therefrom during 1957-1959. In India this new denomination has three constituent regions: (a) Assemblies of God of East India, (b) Assemblies of God of South India, and (c) Assemblies of God of North India. Dimapur of Nagaland is the headquarters of the Assemblies of East India. In Churachandpur District of Manipur, Churches of this denomination have been established at Dumsan, Rovakot, Rengkai, etc.

The International Church of Foursquare Gospel founded in 1927 in the USA has also got its footing in North-east India having 26 mission workers and over 60 churches. In Churachandpur District of Manipur there are over 2,500 believers all who are of Hmar language background. The Christian Revival Church is run in
Churachandpur by the members of a single dialect i.e., Thadou-Kuki. The total member of followers of this Church in Manipur has been estimated to be around 3,000. Its head office is at K. Phaicham (Chiengkonpang), Lamka (Churachandpur). Founded in 1970, Revival Church of God earlier named the Independent Church of Manipur (ICM), is a purely localized evangelical denomination of Manipur. Though its headquarters are located at Hill Town, Lamka (Churachandpur), this independent church has three organizational districts: Kanan district, Leilon district and Phaitiengjang district.

There have emerged of late some sects professing different types of creed. They believed in similar doctrines with minor differences. They are: Church of God (Seven Day) having 100 members, Assembly of Yahweh (150 members), Bet Hashim Medrash (200 members), Bet-el Church (200 members), Mount Zion Church of God (50 members), Spiritual Sabbatarian (200 members), Orthodox Judaism (200 members), and Isræls (150 members).

3. 2 Roman Catholic

Though George Brun of the Holy Cross Society came to Aizawl and acquired land at Kulikawn where its headquarters were built the then British Government permitted Roman Catholicism to work only in Meghalaya and the Assam plains (there had been a few Catholics also in Tripura) before Indian
Independence. Only after Indian Independence were the Catholics able to expand their missionary works in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The impact of Catholicism is therefore comparatively slow and low particularly among the Kuki-Chins; the number of Catholic Kuki-Chins in Mizoram may be estimated roughly to be not much about 10,000.

In Manipur the first Catholic Church of the Kuki-Chins was introduced at Sugunu in 1965 under the St. Joseph’s Parish. The other Catholic Churches that were subsequently set up among them, chronologically arranged, are: Church of Good Shepherd Parish at Churachandpur town in 1969, Church of St. Xavier’s Parish at Thanlon of Churachandpur District, Church of St. Thomas Parish at Singhat (Churachandpur District) in 1978, Church of St. George’s Parish at Moreh in 1986, and Church of St. Francis De Sales Parish at Kangpokpi in 1987; the 1990-91 statistics of the Catholic followers of these churches are 3100, 1300, 550, 900, 1200, 400 respectively.